

Article

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The Herbalist's Bible: John Parkinson's Lost Classic Rediscovered. A Selection and Commentary by Julie Bruton-Seal and Matthew Seal

Editorial

The herbal in question is the *Theatrum Botanicum*, a massive tome written in English by John Parkinson (1567-1650), the renowned apothecary and herbalist to Charles I. Published at last in 1640, on the eve of the English Civil War, it was lost in that catastrophe of national strife, like its royal dedicatee Charles who was executed in 1649, and was never republished. Its classic status as one of the great English herbals, if not the greatest, was acknowledged by botanists in the past, and Parkinson's writings on a selection of herbal medicines still in use today are now made highly accessible in this publication by herbalist Julie Bruton-Seal and her writer and editor husband, Matthew Seal.

The beautiful presentation of this book, from the reproduction of a hand-coloured frontispiece of a copy in the Bodleian Library, Oxford, through the many woodcuts of plants in the original work carefully prepared for representation in these pages alongside other early modern images, to the eye-catching modern photographs of those same plants growing in fields, hedges and waysides today, shows that the task was a labour of love for the authors. This was aided by their obtaining a personal copy of the *Theatrum Botanicum* (for a sizeable sum) which they have since pored over, to bring sound scholarship to their study. Monographs of nearly one hundred plants make up the bulk of the text, typically comprising an edited version of Parkinson's original sentences and image, along with a useful glossary, on the left-hand page, and a modern rendering of the same or similar uses on the right-hand page, with photographs and cautions over safety where needed. Introductory chapters detail Parkinson's life, his career as an apothecary and gardener and his authorship of two great works in English, *Paradisus in sole paradisus terrestris*, his innovative study of the English garden as a place of delight and pleasure, and *Theatrum Botanicum*, his herbal exemplified here. Six appendices provide other useful information on, for instance, the way he grouped different kinds of plants into 'tribes' for the book and those plants that he was the first to describe at all. There are brief biographies of the famous herbal writers that Parkinson drew on and a bibliography of historical studies on plants, herbals and the medicine of his time. The authors stoutly defend the quality of Parkinson's great work and they provide readers with sufficient sources for them to make their own minds up.

The herbal monographs themselves, no doubt, prove to be the most attractive feature for readers. The authors made their selection of nearly one hundred herbs on the basis that they are still medicinally popular today, or are 'lost herbs' which have dropped out of use in the last century but should be looked at again and anew, or were new in Parkinson's time and have become very familiar in the modern world. In the last category, for example, are

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chillies, coca and tomatoes. Chillies are given an extended treatment, revealing how important this remedy is to herbalists as a circulatory agent and digestive aid, and which purges catarrh from the body. The format works best and brings the relevance of Parkinson's work most alive when the old and the new uses mesh. Many English common or garden herbs are represented here, from burdock, elder and lovage to nettles, rosemary and sorrel. Such entries make apparent the continuity of herbal knowledge over the centuries. This was not taken as read by the authors, however, since they actively experimented with Parkinson's recommendations. A copper alembic was purchased to distil raspberries in two ways, according to their source's instructions. Fresh tobacco leaf was chewed for toothache (effective but 'with a buzz') and juiced and applied to speed the healing of cuts and grazes. A recipe for tobacco ointment is given and other recipes for preparing the herbs discussed are sprinkled throughout the text.

As the authors acknowledge, many herbs have accrued new uses, empirically discovered and researched, while other uses from Parkinson's day have been abandoned as ineffective. The silica content of horsetail, employed today to strengthen connective tissue, was not known to Parkinson; nor was the existence of viruses, against which a number of the herbs here are stated to be effective. On the other hand, the application of those herbs listed by Parkinson for the treatment of snake bites or the plague, or the 'biting of mad dogs' (rabies) - an ubiquitous indication in early modern herbals - have no modern counterpart across the page. The contrast helps to highlight the progression in knowledge of diseases and of the evidence for the healing powers of herbal medicines.

This book has been written in an uncomplicated and user-friendly way, by using the common names of herbs and by avoiding overly technical or scientific analysis, to produce a very accessible way to explore the great English herbals of the sixteenth and seventeenth century through Parkinson's *magnum opus*. It

will appeal to herbalists and their students, and to gardeners, not least because of the profusion of beautiful images - on this basis it would make a nice present for anyone interested in books and plants - and may even be useful for student historians of the period in affording them some knowledge of the medicines of the day. The authors promise further volumes of selections from the herbal's 3800 plants. The accessibility of the text can have drawbacks, however, and I would recommend that one improvement should certainly be made. Although there are boxes of red print detailing cautions over the use of some of the plants, I find this safety information to be sometimes underplayed and not sufficiently em-

phasised (for instance, with groundsel, mistletoe and sassafras). Given that the readers the book addresses are not exclusively those with herbal or medical knowledge, a standardised format of warnings concerning safety, based on current evidence, could be introduced without losing the openness and appeal of the book. Finally, on a small point, not every seventeenth-century term is correctly rendered in modern words by the glossary. Checking obsolete words in the Oxford English Dictionary will further support the translation of knowledge from Parkinson's age into the modern day, a time-travelling journey well worth taking.